



CONVERSATIONS

OFFICE OF SPONSORS FOR INFANTS,

AND

THE USE OF THE

SIGN OF THE CROSS IN BAPTISM,

BY

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“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be  
baptized.”? Acts x, 47.  
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NOTE.—The aim of this treatise is to present the more usual objections, with their answers, in a readable form. Those who wish for fuller satisfaction, may consult the works of Hooker, Wall, Waterland, &c., &c., as well as more modern works, "Loutron," "The Sacrament of Responsibility," "Mercy to Babes," &c., &c.

CONVERSATION I.

Clergyman—Good morning, Mr. Newcome. I am Mr. ——, the Church of England minister here. I have heard that you are a member of the Church, come to reside in this parish, and have called to make your acquaintance.

Mr. Newcome—Thank you, Sir. I belong to the Church of England, but since I came out, seven years ago, I have lived much of the time in places where I had not the opportunity of attending church.

Clergyman—That was unfortunate; but now that you have the opportunity, I hope you will improve it. You and your wife were, I doubt not, baptized and confirmed before you left the old country?

Mr. N.—Yes, Sir.

Clergyman—Then I will hope to see you both, not only at the public worship of the Lord's House, but with due preparation at the Lord's Supper also (Cor. xi 1 28). Have your little ones been baptized?

Mr. N.—The two oldest were baptized before we left home; but we have four more, born in this country, that have not been baptized?

Clergyman—I am sorry to hear that. A sacrament of so much grace and blessing (Mark xvi. 16, Acts ii. 38, xxii. 16, Gal. iii. 27, &c., &c.) should not be neglected; but I suppose it was want of opportunity, not neglect, that prevented their baptism.

Mr. N.—I can hardly say so, Sir. There were times when I might have had it done. But you know that in America it is not thought of much consequence whether children be baptized or not.

Clergyman—I know that there are too many persons, both here and elsewhere, who speak slightly of infant baptism, but can anything be unimportant which the Lord hath appointed? (Matt. xxviii. 19.)

Mr. N.—But some think that there is no authority for baptising infants.

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Clergyman—Is there any Scripture authority forbidding infant baptism? Did our Saviour, when he bade his disciples "baptize all nations," say, "excepting little infants?"

Mr. N.—No.

Clergyman—Would not his disciples then feel authorized to do as they had seen done? They had seen Jewish children circumcised at 8 days old, and so admitted into the Church of God; would they not probably admit the young children of Christians into the Church of God by baptism, the Christian substitute for circumcision. They had seen the children of converts to Judaism baptized with their parents; would they have any doubt that the children of converts to Christianity should be baptized also? Nay, they had heard the Lord say, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven," could they hesitate to believe that children may be fit subjects of God's Church, or Kingdom, on earth?

Mr. N.—But is there any proof that the Apostles DID baptize infants?

Clergyman—There is proof that they baptized whole families without excepting infants; as for instance, Lydia and her household (Acts xvi. 15), the Jailor and all his (ver. 33), and the household of Stephanos (1 Cor. i. 16). The fact that the Gospel was then a "new thing" in the world, and had first to convince adults that it came from God, sufficiently accounts for our only reading at first of children baptized in families. Afterwards when children were born to parents who were Christians already, they were baptized by themselves. Justyn Martyr and Ireneus, of the 2nd century; Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian, of the 3rd, and Gregory Nazianzen and Chrysostom, of the 4th—all testify to the *universal* prevalence of infant baptism.

Mr. N.—To tell you the truth, Sir, I have scarcely a doubt myself (especially after what you have said) about the authority for infant baptism, but I am not so clear about the office of sponsors, which our baptismal service plainly requires.

Clergyman—The Church seems in the first place to have derived the office of sponsors from the custom of the Jews. See the account of the circumcision of John the Baptist (Luke i. 59-63), where the coming together of kinsfolks and friends to circumcise the child is spoken of as if it had been a common custom. It was a custom as old, indeed, as the time of Isaiah (viii. 2), if, with many learned divines, we consider the witnesses there spoken of as witnesses of the child's circumcision. And Buxtorf in his work on the Jewish Synagogue, tells us that the Jews at

the circumcision of an infant had, besides the parents, a witness or instructor. The same witness, or witnesses, according to Dr. Lightfoot, were required at the baptism of Proselytes. Following such example and authority, the primitive Christians had sponsors for infants at baptism, as Hyginus and Augustino testify; and this custom, followed universally for many centuries, has also the approbation of the Bohemian, French Protestant, Dutch Reformed, and other Churches on the Continent of Europe. (See Falloon's Apostolic Church, page 243, &c.)

Mr. N.—I can readily admit, even if there were no authority such as you adduce, that the Church has power to appoint any office or ceremony which she may think conducive to piety, so long as nothing be done contrary to Scripture, but what is the advantage of the office of sponsors ?

Clergyman—In times of persecution (1) it provides for the religious instruction of children in case of the flight, banishment, imprisonment, or death of their parents; and it gives additional security and attestation to the profession of the Christian religion. At all times (2) it supplies means whereby infants, the sick, the dumb, and all who are unable to answer for themselves, may be admitted into the Christian covenant by virtue of an undertaking made for them by their sureties. It establishes a special relationship to see to the religious instruction of children in case of the death of their parents, or their incompetence or neglect; and it provides *witnesses* and *remembrancers* of the Christian profession of those who are able to answer for themselves.

Mr. N.—So far as your reasons go, the office seems useful and expedient; but is it ever in practice found so useful? Do sponsors generally fulfil their duties? I have known many, who seemed neither to be religious themselves, nor to care for the religion of others, and they certainly never interested themselves in the religious instruction of their godchildren.

Clergyman—What you say is no doubt true, and greatly to be lamented, but if the office itself is a useful one, we ought not to abolish it because some do not fulfil the duties of it. Our aim should be to have it better understood and more faithfully carried out. Some blame, I fear, most be attached to parents in choosing irreligious persons as sponsors for their children; whereas, if they would comply with the Church's rule, and choose none but communicants for that office, there would be less objection on this score. While too many sponsors are utterly

careless of their duties, there are some, on the other hand, faithful and conscientious, who always, as in duty bound, maintain a watchful interest over the religious well-being of their godchildren, and commend them daily in their prayers to God's continued grace and blessing.

Mr. N.—It seems to me, Sir, in this view, that the sponsor's office is a very weighty one. I would hardly like to undertake it for the child of another, and therefore I would shrink from asking another to undertake it for mine.

Clergyman—God forbid, my friend, that you should underestimate the office of the sponsorship. It is a useful and important one; but is it too weighty to be undertaken? Some person, in case of the parents' death or inability, should care for the child's spiritual interests; and why should you decline so charitable a work? If the orphan's temporal affairs required a guardian, there would be no lack of friends or relatives to look after his temporal interests, and is it not as necessary that some one should look after his spiritual and eternal interests? Is the child's soul to be exposed to danger because no one will care for it? Shame on those professing Christians who would willingly be guardians for a child in temporal matters, but will not be guardians for it in spiritual things!

Mr. N.—But the promises, as I understand them, are beyond my ability. I cannot answer for any child renouncing sin, believing God, and keeping His commandments. I can hardly answer for myself, much less for another.

Clergyman—That objection arises from a misunderstanding of the sponsor's duty. The sponsor is only the child's mouthpiece in making the engagement. The transaction is between Christ and the infant, the minister being Christ's agent, and the sponsor the infant's. And as what the minister says, he says on behalf of Christ, so what the sponsor says, he says on behalf of the child. In every baptism it is the child, and not the sponsor that is bound by the promises.

Mr. N.—But what, then, is the use of the sponsor's answers?

Clergyman—As every man is bound to believe and to do as God directs, whether he promise it or not, the answers do not add anything to the child's obligations. But their use is to express the nature of the Christian covenant, God in that covenant promising certain blessings on condition of certain duties to be performed by man. It is to do for the unconscious child what you would do for a dumb adult, who, being unable to

speak, made a covenant and promised for his own advantage, through your mouth. It is to set baptism in its true light before Christians, as representing to them their profession, and reminding them of their obligations; and to keep before sponsors the great object of their office, which is to see that "the infant be taught, so soon as he shall be able to learn, what a solemn vow, promise and profession he hath made in that sacrament; to" call upon him to hear sermons, and chiefly to provide that he may learn the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul's health." And now, will you think over our conversation, and let me know your impressions of it when we meet again? We can resume the subject then if you are not quite satisfied. I trust you will find your residence here pleasant and profitable in the best sense of the words. Good bye!

Mr. N.—Good bye, Sir, and I thank you for your good wishes. I will certainly think over again carefully all that you have said.

CONVERSATION II.

SIGN OF THE CROSS.

Mr. N.—I am glad to see you again so soon. Since your last visit my wife and I have often talked about the baptism of our children, and I was able to repeat to her the substance of our conversation. It has greatly settled our minds in this matter. We were not aware before that such good reasons could be assigned for the office of sponsors.

Clergyman—There is no doubt, that these reasons were convincing to our forefathers, when, at the Reformation, they ordered so ancient and useful an office to be retained in the Church. It has come down to us, approved and practised by the Church of the New Testament from Apostolic times, and commended to our observance not only by the Church of England, but by nearly all the Reformed Churches on the continent of Europe, as well as by the Roman and Greek Churches. Its inherent usefulness and advantages have been acknowledged by good and wise men of every age. If it were nothing more than providing a substitute who, in case of the death, neglect, or incompetence of parents, would see after the religious well-being of their children, no unprejudiced person could reasonably object to it.

Mr. N.—I must honestly say, sir, that your arguments as regards sponsors are satisfactory and convincing to my mind ; but there is still another point on which I have felt scruples,—that is the use of the sign of the cross in baptism.

Clergyman—I do not wonder that you have felt scruples concerning it, considering the superstitious uses to which some have put the cross ; but if the sign be useful and edifying, why deprive ourselves of the proper use of it on that account ?

Mr. N.—Well, sir, it seems to me to be adding a device of man to an ordinance of God.

Clergyman—if the human device were put in place of the Divine Ordinance, or on an equality with it, there would be

reason in your objection. But such is not the case. The baptism is complete in all essentials before, and the sign follows afterwards, simply as an emblem of the Christian faith, to which the baptised is pledged,—“in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed of the faith of Christ crucified,” &c. Your argument would forbid the use of anything in baptism except the bare words of Christ; even the prayers and other services, that have been added for the more solemn and edifying celebration of the sacrament. Nay, it would forbid public worship altogether, since prayers and ceremonies of men’s devising, form a necessary part of every Christian service.

Mr. N.—Is there any good reason or authority for the use of this sign?

Clergyman—Its use is grounded not only on the appropriateness of the sign itself, as an emblem of the Christian religion, but also on what we conceive to be the spirit of such passages as those:—“Whoso doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple,” (Luke XIV 27), and, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” &c., (Gal. VI 14.) “The cross” here means of course “trials and sufferings”—any self-denials, reproaches, pains or sorrows, which we are called on to bear for Jesus’s sake. In token of this obligation of theirs, and of their willingness to suffer for Christ, the early Christians adopted the sign of the Cross, and so far from being ashamed of it, amid the reproaches of their enemies, they gloried in it, “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.” As, therefore, Christians are described as “sealed” for Christ, (2 Cor. I 22 Eph. I, 13, Rev. VII, 3, 4, &c.,) and as having his name or mark on their forehead, (Rev. XXII, 4), and as masters and generals anciently marked the foreheads of their servants and soldiers with their names or marks, that it might be known to whom they belonged, so the Church in all ages has adopted the sign of the cross, as an appropriate emblem of Christianity, to mark all those who become in baptism the servants and soldiers of Christ. It was in allusion to this, that the ancient fathers called the sign of the cross, “The Lord’s Signet,” or the “Lord’s Seal.”

Mr. N.—Yet surely, it is not the cross on our foreheads, but in our hearts, that arms us with faith, patience, constancy, and courage.

Clergyman—So in effect, said St. Paul, “Neither is that cir-

cumcision, which is outward in the flesh ; but circumcision—is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter," &c. Yet circumcision was ordained by God as a sign of the obligation of the Jew to circumcise his heart. And the sign of the cross may, in like manner, impress upon us our obligation to "crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts." We are naturally more impressed by signs and acts, than by words alone. And so in all societies, the ceremony of initiation is usually accompanied by the use of signs and emblems, intended to impress on the members the fact of their membership, and the obligations they are under.

Mr. N.—But if the early Christians did well to honor the cross, when the cross was despised, should we not do well to abolish the sign, when the cross is worshipped ? Did not Hezekiah destroy the brazen serpent when it became an object of idolatry?

Clergyman—Observe that the *material* cross, and the *sign* of the cross, are too different things, and the abuse of the one will not take away the lawful use of the other. We make no use of the *material* cross in *worship*; we merely use the sign to signify that we belong to Christ, the crucified one; and are bound, as his disciple, to bear the cross for him, (Luke XIV, 27). We place no virtue in its use, and pay no honor to it; we regard it as an impressive sign and nothing else. May we not believe that Hezekiah, who destroyed the image of the serpent, would have retained the sign, if it had been capable of a like-edifying use ?

Mr. N.—Still, sir, for the prevention of possible evil, would it not be right to take it away ?

Clergyman—It is neither necessary nor right, nor wise, to run into one extreme for the prevention of another. There is no Christian institution that is not liable to abuse. Take the Lord's Day for example. Perhaps more sin is perpetrated during its idle hours than upon any other day in the week; yet no Christian, (even apart from the Divine command), would be willing to give up its sacred rest and worship on account of the abuse to which it is liable. Our best course, and the principle upon which the Church has proceeded is, to reform the abuses of that which may have a lawful use. For instance, because some men abuse alcohol, should we therefore destroy and abolish it ? No. It has its uses in medicine and in the arts. Suppose that some Israelite had proposed to destroy the brazen serpent which stood on the laver in Solomon's temple, on

the ground that their fathers had once worshipped a golden calf, would they not have been justly chidden for their folly? And is it any wiser to take away the ceremony of crossing the forehead in baptism, because some have adored a visible cross?

Mr. N.—Your explanations have gone far to remove my scruples, which I now perceive were mistaken ones; and I shall certainly no longer regard the use of the sign of the cross in baptism with aversion, since, rightly understood, it tends to profit and edification. But, why has the church not explained her views on this point?

Clergyman.—That she has done, as I will now show you. in the note at the end of the office for public baptism o she says : "To take away all scruple concerning the use of the sign of the cross in baptism ; the true explanation thereof, and the just reasons for the retaining of it, may be seen in the 30th canon, first published in the year 1604." The 30th canon enters at length into this explanation ; but the chief reasons for retaining the sign are summed up in this extract, which I will leave with you :—

"First—The Church of England, since the abolishing of Popery, hath ever held and taught, and so doth hold and teach, that the sign of the cross used in Baptism, is no part of the substance of that sacrament ; for when the Minister dipping the infant in water, or laying water upon the face of it, (as the manner also is), hath pronounced those words, 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,' the infant is fully and perfectly baptized. So the sign of the cross being afterward used, doth neither add anything to the virtue and perfection of baptism, nor, being omitted, doth detract anything from the effect and substance of it."

"Secondly—It is apparent in the Communion Book, that the infant baptized, is by virtue of baptism, before it is signed with the sign of the cross, received into the congregation of Christ's flock as a perfect member thereof, and not by any power ascribed unto the sign of the cross. So that for the very remembrance of the cross, which is very precious to all them that rightly believe in Jesus Christ, and in the other respects mentioned, the Church of England hath retained still the sign of it in baptism ; following therein the Primitive and Apostolical Churches, and accounting it a lawful, outward ceremony and honorable badge, whereby the infant is dedicated to the service of Him that died upon the cross, as by the words used in the Book of Common prayer it may appear."

"Lastly—The use of the sign of the cross in baptism, being thus purged from all Popish superstitions and error, and reduced in the Church of England to the primary institution of it, upon those true rules of doctrine concerning things indifferent, which are consonant to the Word of God, and the judgment of all the ancient Fathers, we hold it the part of every private man, both Minister and other, reverently to retain the true use of it prescribed by public authority: considering that things of themselves indifferent do in some sort alter their natures, when they are either commanded or forbidden by a lawful magistrate; and may not be omitted at every man's pleasure contrary to the law, when they be commanded, nor used when they are prohibited."—XXX Canon.

